

EC farmers apply for government aid as 'worst drought in living memory' takes its toll

As the Eastern Cape is gripped by one of the "worst droughts in living memory", about 1,500 commercial farmers have applied to the government for drought relief in a last-ditch effort to stay afloat. Some farmers have been forced to cull their livestock because of the drought, according to farmer's organisation Agri EC. For others, the drought aid received to date has not been enough.



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However, there was some relief this week when the Eastern Cape government said it would make R100m available for drought assistance. The announcement was made at a water summit being held at Graaff-Reinet in the Karoo, where dams and boreholes have run dry.

"For most farmers the pantry is empty – it has been for many years. They have no stored supplies to fall back on," Peter Cloete, AgriEC deputy president. "They desperately need government aid."

Without much-needed summer rainfall, all that could happen, Cloete said, was damage control.

"Farmers need to access the R74m in drought relief [made available by the provincial government]. Add to that the R600m which has been applied for nationally [for drought relief], then this crisis can at least be managed," he said.

One recipient of government aid, Aberdeen farmer Dickie Ogilvie, said while the aid had helped in the short term, he still has had to cull many of his angora goats. "We received 120 bags of maize in April from the government, but it only lasted 20 days. Due to the drought, we are having to buy in stock feed to the tune of R120,000 a month," he said.

Ogilvie has farmed angora goats and merino sheep in the area for 32 years.

"This is possibly the worst drought I have had to deal with, although the drought in 1965/66 was apparently horrific too," he said.

Having had to lay off staff and reduce his livestock by 40%, Ogilvie said he feared the effect the drought would have on communities as unemployment in the sector increased.

Cloete echoed this concern, saying: "We are third-generation farmers. We consider our employees family, not just numbers. Hard as it hurts, economically we have had to let some of them go."

Ogilvie said that consumers would soon bear the brunt of the drought, as local production fell and pricier imports had to be sourced by retailers.

With the likelihood of more intense droughts in the future as a result of climate change, the way government and farmers engaged needed to change, Cloete said. "What we need to do is to sit down with government officials on a quarterly basis. We need to look to the future, anticipate problems and set about solving them before it becomes a crisis."

Boreholes were not the solution as they were no guarantee of long-term water, and many are running dry amid the worsening drought, Cloete said.

With many farmers having to cut back their core breeding stock due to the lack of feed available, any further cutbacks would mean "they have no future as farmers, and this would impact the country as a whole".

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